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ABSTRACT

The potential uses of ethnography and aesthetic criticism as sources for developing a qualitative approach to evaluating classrooms are delineated. Such work involves three interrelated processes--description, interpretation, and appraisal--which are discussed and exemplified. When describing a classroom, the evaluator vividly renders it, recreating it for others, and points out its pervasive quality. Interpretation consists of discussing the social meaning of classroom events, analyzing a classroom into its constituent parts and resynthesizing them to form a whole, and relating classroom events to external considerations. Appraisal entails weighing whether (and on what grounds) a particular lesson or practice is worthwhile and whether the lesson or practice was executed well. These three processes necessitate the researcher's drawing upon many ideas from education, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and so forth. Additionally, consideration is given to qualifications of an educational evaluator using qualitative methods--a broad understanding of classrooms, an ability to observe classrooms sensitivity, and the ability to transmit the experience to others. (Author/RC)

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The Use of Ethnography and Criticism as Methods for Disclosing Classroom Settings

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In a recent cartoon in the San Francisco Chronicle, a portly executive-type member of "The Now Society" talks to Margaret on the telephone. Leaning forward across his desk, he instructs her, "If we're going to communicate, Margaret, you're going to have to quantify." This belief about the importance and value of quantification prevails in educational research as well as in executives' offices. That quantification predominates is evident when paging through volumes of the American Educational Research Journal or Mirrors of Behavior. But as many have argued recently--Mann, Easley, Eisner, Stufflebeam, Vallance, and others--the exclusive use of methods of quantification may permit important aspects of schooling to elude our grasp and may substantially misrender events in classrooms.

Alternatively, research and evaluation about classrooms could be carried out to generate qualitative information--that is, information about the qualities, the essences, the character and nature of classroom life. Two domains of inquiry yield qualitative information in their respective disciplines. They are ethnography--the study of cultures--and aesthetic criticism--the study of works of art. Both of these, it seems to me, provide potentially helpful epistemological and methodological considerations for developing viable approaches of qualitative inquiry about classroom life.

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These two domains of inquiry are highly empirical, and through them ethnographers and critics construct meaning by rendering and making sense out of the culture or aesthetic object under study. For example, in The Interpretation of Cultures, Clifford Geertz described and interpreted the kaleidescopic events of a Balinese cockfight. And last winter Jean Pierre Ponnelle directed and designed a new production of The Flying Dutchman in San Francisco in which events of the opera were conceived of as merely a dream of the steersman, also Erik in the new production. Normally, Erik and the steersman are separate, and the opera is staged as if it were real, far from a dream. Critics lost no time in calling the unique interpretation iconoclastic and "a rape of Wagner." In addition, they discussed the relationship between Senta's theme and the Dutchman's, the strong influence of Beethoven on Wagner's composition, and the overture's role in foreshadowing the conflict and salvation, the catastrophe and climate of the opera.

Critics and ethnographers describe, interpret and (to varying degrees) appraise works of art and culture. They share their perceptions of reality with us, the masses unable or unwilling to accompany them to the Balinese cockfight or the Ponnelle production of The Flying Dutchman. In sharing their constructions of meaning, as Dewey said, they "reeducate our perception." They inform our vision and our experience, so if we happen to attend a Balinese cockfight or Ponnelle's production, our understanding of it will be heightened. Criticisms and ethnographies also provide us with frames of reference that transcend the particular experience and help us understand other experiences. When another director liberally reinterprets an opera or a play, we will recall criticisms of Ponnelle's interpretation of Wagner. Similarly, qualitative accounts of classrooms alert us about what to expect and provide constructs to use when we observe other classrooms or when we ourselves teach.

Qualitative inquiry as a critic, an ethnographer, or an educational researcher requires the reliance on three attributes of the researcher. For one thing, qualitative researchers must have a broad understanding of the phenomenon under study. Disclosing what happens in a classroom may necessitate drawing upon theories or research findings from subject matter fields, child development, sociology, education, or knowledge about other classrooms or the community. Eisner (1975) referred to this intimacy with schooling and related concerns as "educational connoisseurship." In addition to educational connoisseurship, a second qualification of a researcher using a qualitative approach is sensitivity to and sophistication about classroom events. That is, the researcher must be carefully insightful in observing and interpreting. As Henry Hazlitt (1933:26) quipped, "Some people can look at a Cezanne for an hour without ever really seeing it." Surely people can look at classrooms for hours without ever really seeing them, as well. Finally, regarding qualifications, qualitative research takes (or makes) a good writer. Capturing and rendering the qualities of a classroom experience requires the ability to graphically communicate one's experience to others, to recreate it evocatively, to interweave description, interpretation and appraisal artfully, as well as having the base of theory and information and a sensitive eye and ear.

But what principles and techniques of critics and ethnographers may prove useful in qualitative inquiry in education? Generally, the paradigm of qualitative research begins with observation. Then the researcher forms interpretations, appraisals or generalizations about the phenomenon. Finally, these generalizations are validated by observing again or reading field notes for evidence supporting or refuting the generalization.

More specifically, three processes--description, interpretation and appraisal--enter into qualitative inquiry and are used by critics and ethnographers alike. In practice, the processes are interwoven and may occur in

any order. But for purposes of discussion, let us consider them separately.

In describing a classroom, the researcher vividly renders it, recreating it for others. The setting, a running account of what happens, particularly important characters or excerpts from talk in the classroom may contribute to descriptions. Here is a portion of a description of Mr. Spaulding's fourth grade reading lesson.

> Every Friday during reading, Mr. Spaulding assigns SRA kit booklets to all. Three children also have pages in a workbook to complete, and the rest of the time the class is to spend reading the paperbacks waiting on the shelf by the window. But not any paperback will do. It has to be in a category not yet read, like history, fantasy, science fiction, animal stories, sports stories, and eleven other categories. Meanwhile, Mr. Spaulding drives his chair up and down the three rows of formica-topped metal desks, making house calls to consult with children about which SRA booklets they completed during the week and which categories of books they read. He visits Sara:
>
> Mr. Spaulding: Okay, Sara, what did you do in SRA this week?
> Sara: These (indicating them on her chart).
> Mr. Spaulding: Okay (marking them in his grade book). Heh! That's good! You did eight! What book did you read?
> Sara: Harriet the Spy.
> Mr. Spaulding: Did you finish it? Okay, Sara, let's see, yes. That's an adventure story. Okay, good. (He moves on to Ken.)

One aspect of description consists of pointing out the pervasive qualities of a classroom. By pervasive qualities, I mean the essential character permeating a classroom or a lesson. In our daily lives, we frequently refer to the pervasive qualities of an experience. "What's it like in San Francisco?" or "What was AERA like?" someone will ask you. And you'll reply by characterizing San Francisco or AERA. Surely you won't use the same pervasive qualities to refer to both, for each is quite different from the other. Similarly, the pervasive qualities used to characterize one classroom will probably not wholly fit another. One teacher may predominantly lecture in a joking manner, interspersing the factual presentation with humorous

asides. Another may discuss factual material intellectually with students rather than in a joking manner.

Let us turn now to another process of qualitative inquiry, interpretation, comprised of three aspects. One aspect consists of discussing the social meaning of events by engaging in what Gilbert Ryle (in Geertz, 1973) referred to as "thick description." Social phenomena, such as events in classrooms, even when reduced to discrete acts, differ from physical phenomena in an important respect. Social phenomena must be interpreted, and may have several interpretations. During a lecture, for instance, when children smile and nod, or murmur assent, or ah, do they do so because they agree with the teacher? because they understand? to evince an interest or understanding that isn't really there? to mimic another child who's nodding? to keep the teacher happy? Or is it out of habit? The description of the physical behavior--nodding--is not the concern here, but rather the social meaning of the nodding and ah's is of concern.

A second aspect of interpretation involves analyzing a classroom into its constituent parts and resynthesizing them to explain their affiliations and how they operate in a configuration. The researcher attempts to discern how parts of classroom life relate to the total pattern. In Mr. Spaulding's room, for instance, he assigned the work in reading. Children maintained records about how many stories or SRA booklets were read, but did not discuss the merit of a book or interpret it. The children seemed generally uninvolved in reading and described it as boring. While Mr. Spaulding drove his chair around to confer with individuals, 90% of the others engaged in personal errands--examining the dimple in the wall, unwinding the cord to the electric typewriter and taking it out, winding up the cord to the electric

typewriter and putting it away, curling hair around an index finger, poking at the hole in a sock, returning to their desks just before M.. Spaulding paid his visit. The configuration here consists of the nature of assignments, Mr. Spaulding's questions about how much was done rather than questions of recall or synthesis, and the personal errands. Reading lessons in Mr. Spaulding's room cannot really be understood by examining any one of those features alone. By constructing configurations, the actions of students and teacher are not portrayed as if they were random, isolated or discrete acts; they are given meaning by disclosing their relationship to other aspects of the scene and by noting patterns of events. Additionally, comparisons of several classrooms can by made on the basis of configurations. In another classroom, some elements of the configuration may differ from elements of a configuration about Mr. Spaulding's reading class and permit comparison or contrast on that basis.

So far, I have delineated two types of interpretation--social meanings and configurations. A final aspect of interpretation relates classroom events to external considerations. These considerations may include theories or research findings from education and the social sciences, knowledge of the history of curriculum and classroom practice, information about the neighborhood or school system, and so forth. Mr. Spaulding's teaching of reading may be more adequately understood if one knows about parent pressure for evidence of reading. Children trudge home with copious quantities of reading papers each day, providing that evidence. Or the rowdiness of children on a particular day may be related to the imminence of Halloween. On a different theoretical level, reinforcement theory may provide richer understanding of certain behavior. This type of interpretation is reciprocal. Not only does the theory

provide an interpretation, but the interpretation vividly exemplifies the theory in practice, animating it. Or it may suggest weaknesses or novel twists to the theory not previously considered.

Description and interpretation are two processes of qualitative inquiry in education as discussed in this paper. A third is appraisal. In appraisal, we ask the superficially facile questions, Is the lesson (or whatever) worth doing? and Was it done well? When considering the educational significance of the lesson--whether it was worth doing--a researcher might take into account the potentially deleterious, perhaps unintended consequences of the practice. How well is it suited or unsuited to the children in terms of development, social and intellectual considerations? Given the amount of time in the school day and various opportunities for learning that could possibly exist, is the experience worthwhile? If so, worthwhile for what purposes? In what ways are these purposes important to the child and to society? The other question of appraisal addresses how well the practice or lesson was taught--the educational quality of the lesson. A researcher could take into account whether key ideas are cloudy, if transitions are handled well, whether children are likely to make sense out of the lesson, and so forth.

For example, one basis for appraising Mr. Spaulding's reading lesson is that children may believe reading is only worthwhile for getting an extrinsic reward--a box checked off in a grade book. That is, one does it to finish an assignment, not to retrieve information or because reading is enjoyable. So Mr. Spaulding may be teaching children how to read, but lose the reading battle, in a sense, by not developing the children's interest in reading. He may teach them <u>how</u> to read, but not <u>to</u> read. Children in his room may not develop a sense of wonder, awe or curiosity about what happens in

books, plodding through them to have the weekly boxes checked. If children prefer personal errands over reading, it does not appear that Mr. Spaulding has intrigued them in reading to any great extent. Additionally, certain important skills of criticism, analysis, interpretation, and attaching personal meaning to stories may be neglected through Mr. Spaulding's form of individualization. Mr. Spaulding keeps track of where students are and he individualizes what they read at the expense of certain important reading skills and attitudes. Is the trade-off worth it? I think not.

In both interpretation and appraisal, it is important for the researcher to reveal the line of reasoning involved, for understanding the bases and line of reasoning permits a reader to locate the source of disagreement with an interpretation or appraisal, if warranted. By sharing the line of reasoning, the report up to the disagreed-upon juncture may still be useful.

When commenting upon classroom life, the researcher's comments must be substantiated. This is done through the complementary criteria of structural corroboration (Pepper, 1945)--how well multiple bits of evidence accord with each other--and referential adequacy--how well the comments accord with the phenomenon observed. Additionally, the researcher wonders how well an interpretation accounts for the evidence and how revealing it is. The merit of this sort of qualitative inquiry should not <u>only</u> rest upon questions of validity, however, but also upon questions of its significance and utility. Frequently, powerful, insightful interpretations are difficult to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt. Carlos Castañeda's work about Don Juan is a case in point. While it is virtually impossible to prove even whether Don Juan actually exists, Castañeda has raised important questions about the capabilities of the human mind. These questions transcend the particular

case Castañeda studied and are important. Perhaps it is a rather radical position, but I believe the questions of the significance and utility of an intepretation are more important than questions of validity. That is, the utility and importance may be more worthwhile criteria for judging the merit of this sort of qualitative inquiry than its validity.

The processes of qualitative inquiry I have outlined this morning are primarily based upon criticism and ethnography. In outlining the processes--description, interpretation, and appraisal--I have attempted to demonstrate their potential contribution to educational research and evaluation. It is my hope that unlike Margaret's friend in "The Now Society," we in education will not only have to quantify to be able to communicate.

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